

ORV Recreation on DNR-Managed Lands Not Whether, But How and Where

by Doug Sutherland, Commissioner of Public Lands

The recreation focus of the Washington State Department of Natural Resources is to allow for public access opportunities on 2.2 million acres of state trust lands, where those activities are compatible with our primary duty to provide financial support for schools and other state institutions, while ensuring long-term protection of the environment. Where recreational activities can coincide with these primary purposes, DNR provides trails, trailhead facilities, and a primitive experience in a natural setting. Across Washington, the 1,100 miles of trails and 13,000 miles of roads offer considerable access for dispersed recreation activities, such as hiking, hunting, trail riding, horseback riding, camping, fishing, bird watching, and sightseeing.

With the help of our partners and volunteers, DNR seeks to provide recreational opportunities that are: designed to protect the resources and the environment while providing a quality experience that is safe for the public, and compatible with trust asset management activities.

Riding Off-Road Vehicles (ORVs) is a popular recreation activity that is enjoyed on state lands. Recently, we made the difficult decision to close DNR-managed land in the Pilchuk Forest to motorized vehicles, and limit vehicular access to street-legal vehicles on DNR-managed land in the North Fork Nooksack River area.

For a number of years, we have worked with ORV groups to educate riders about safety and to design controls on these lands for safe and appropriate riding. We value the working relationships we have with organizations across the state that represent the interests of ORV riders; and their efforts and participation are essential to our Recreation Program.

Unfortunately, we find that the environment cannot support the intensity and concentration of ORV use on the roads and especially on user-built trails in these two popular riding areas. In these times, significant and costly measures are being taken on forest lands to ensure the survival of threatened species, maintenance of clean water, and the health of the forest ecosystems. We cannot afford to risk these valuable investments through unmanaged, off-trail use of these protected areas. In addition, the increasing incidents of serious injury pose an unacceptable risk to public safety, and potentially costly legal liability when accidents do happen.

The action required in these two instances should not be taken as the beginning of the end of ORV recreation on DNR-managed lands. We are committed to providing long-term, sustainable ORV recreation opportunities on state lands, as long as we have the financial resources, user cooperation, and enforcement presence to ensure the lands are properly cared for. DNR offers 400 miles of ORV trails designated exclusively for motorized use, nine developed ORV areas, dispersed multiple-use trails, and numerous roads.

Recreation and public access enjoyed on state lands must be compatible with the first purpose of managing these lands – revenue to support school construction and other public institutions. Activities on the land also must be compatible with good stewardship of the environment and public safety.

Again, our commitment is to stewardship and safety for sustainable riding opportunities. The major component to achieve this objective is for all land managers – public and private – to develop criteria for sustainable ORV recreational access to the lands we manage, and identify

areas that are compatible. We are working closely with a legislative task force on ORV issues and we are exploring opportunities with other land managers toward developing a statewide strategy for ORV recreation.

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